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AUTHOR Cohen, Arthur M.
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ABSTRACT

Projecting the prospects and possibilities for community colleges accurately is not an easy exercise due to the vulnerability of both internal and external conditions to unanticipated forces. One aspect of the community college that is particularly affected by external forces is enrollment. Enrollments are influenced by legislation, the decline in the literacy of high school graduates, immigration, changes in the numbers of college-age adults and college-going rates, and employment needs. Another aspect of the two-year college that has undergone major changes is the curriculum. Emphasis on one or another curriculum area has shifted from time to time depending on student aspirations and the availability of alternative educational resources. The curriculum has experienced shifts toward occupational studies, adult education, and general education, as well as the most recent major change in emphasis towards remedial or compensatory studies. The colleges also face several possibilities in the years ahead if current trends persist or if changes in state and local policies are implemented. Such possibilities for positive change exist in the areas of the assessment of student learning, the identification of common learning outcomes, patterns of funding, the differentiation of curriculum content from student intent, and differential rewards for colleges that achieve certain outcomes. An important prerequisite to realizing positive change in these areas is greater emphasis on educational research that measures the effect of various practices and thus changes instructional functions. (AJL)

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405 HILGARD AVENUE
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(213) 825-3931

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Reconsidering the Community College Contribution

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Projecting the prospects and possibilities for community colleges accurately is not an easy exercise. Population trends and other external forces affecting the institutions can be plotted but the chance of cataclysmic events is always present. Matters internal to the colleges can be diagrammed but it is difficult to separate the desirable from the likely, the hope from the probable. Most of the writing on the colleges is in the form of either deprecation or advocacy; there are few analytical models.

Any assessment of institutional prospects should begin with the realization that the colleges will not change very much. The colleges provide courses for people intending on transfer to senior institutions, job entry preparation, employment upgrading, courses for students' personal interest, literacy development and high school completion programs, and a variety of services to the communities in which they are located. The 1050 publicly funded American community colleges developed over an eighty year span, spreading from state to state along similar lines of service. Emphases have shifted from time to time depending on intrainstitutional priorities, community pressures, and the availability of funds, but the basic structure has remained the same.

The colleges are well established. Few new institutions will open in the years ahead because a community college is now

within commuting distance of most of the nation's population. There will be little contraction in enrollment because the services that the colleges provide will remain important to the 5 million people whom they serve. Funding will continue to be provided within the limits of the political persuasion that all publicly funded institutions must bring to bear on state legislatures and local taxing districts. Although the colleges have been criticized from time to time from within the higher education community, there have been few indicators of public disaffection. The colleges are here to stay in their current form.

This forum is divided into two main categories: Prospects and Possibilities. This paper addresses both. Under Prospects, it considers community college enrollments and curriculum. Under Possibilities are included new ways of assessing college contributions, and revisions in college programs that would more precisely reflect student expectations. The paper concludes with a word on research.

Enrollments

The community colleges grew large by opening access to many students who might not otherwise have engaged in postsecondary education. In the late 1940s and 1950s, veterans of military service swelled enrollments. In the 1960s the World War II baby boom was the main contributor. In the 1980s the number of eighteen-year-olds in the American population declined but the colleges sustained their enrollments by matriculating sizable numbers of adults. (In 1986, for example, the modal student was aged 19 but the median student was aged 25 and the mean was at

age 29.) Overall, enrollment increased from just over half a million in 1960 to more than two million by 1970, and more than four million by 1980. The five million mark was crossed in 1987.

Various extramural events have affected community college enrollments. The colleges have always provided occupational studies but this area of the curriculum was given major impetus in the 1960s when the Vocational Education Acts made sizable funding available for postsecondary, sub-baccalaureate occupational studies. The proportion of students seeking job entry grew so that it soon reached parity with those enrolled to obtain studies leading a baccalaureate. In fact, the two purposes overlapped; by 1974 more students were receiving associate degrees from occupational curriculums than from arts and sciences or general programs. This trend continued so that ten years later occupational graduates outnumbered the liberal arts or general degree recipients by 65 to 35.

Other external events affecting college enrollments include the decline in literacy manifest by high school graduates, the massive numbers of immigrants, changes in the college-age population figures and in the rate of college going, and a shift in job availability. After peaking in the mid 1960s, a precipitous, widespread decline in student ability as measured by verbal and quantitative test scores occurred. The Scholastic Aptitude Test taken by high school seniors showed mathematical ability at 502 in 1963 and 470 in 1977; the verbal ability went from 478 in 1963 to 429 in 1977. Scores on both these tests stabilized in the 1980s but showed little improvement. Because

of the community colleges' open access policies they bore the brunt of the poorly prepared students and were forced to develop a wide range of compensatory education programs.

Immigration has affected community college enrollments but because most of the immigrants concentrate in a few states, their impact on enrollments varies. Southern California, anticipating an average of 110,000 immigrants per year for the next 20 years, has been and will continue to be markedly affected. Foreign immigration has also enhanced enrollments in community colleges in Florida, New York, and New Jersey. One Florida college has by far the greatest number of foreign-born students of any institution of higher education, community college or university. This influx of non-native English speakers has affected the curriculum so that three-fourths of all language instruction nationwide is in Spanish and English as a second language.

The college-age population is a major force on all community college enrollments. In 1998 the number of 18-year-olds in the population will be 20 percent less than it was at its peak in 1979. The decline will be greatest in the Northeast, lowest in the West. To this population figure must also be factored in the rate of high school graduation which has remained steady at around 75 percent or a little less for the past 20 years. However, more people recently have been taking longer to complete high school; around 82 percent of the 18- to 24-year-olds have graduated. Here again the variation between states has differential effect. Florida and Mississippi are at the low end of the scale with 55 to 60 percent high school graduation rates and Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa, with 85 percent graduation

rates, are at the upper end.

The rate of college going is less predictable. It remained relatively stable at just over 45 percent from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s but it varied by ethnicity. In the 1980s around 56 percent of the Anglo high school graduates were entering college while less than 40 percent of the blacks and 45 percent of the Hispanics were matriculating. This has a magnified effect on the community colleges because around one third of the Anglos and blacks and 42 percent of the Hispanics entering higher education as full-time freshman in the mid 1980s began in community colleges. Clearly, any increase in the rate of high school graduation and college entry for Hispanics will have an accentuated effect on community college enrollments, especially in states where the Hispanics comprise a large proportion of the population.

The colleges will continue enrolling job seekers because of the high demand for people in occupations for which some postsecondary training but not a bachelor's degree is expected. Demand will be high for electrical and electronics technicians, computer programmers and operators, real estate salespeople, data processing equipment repair people, medical technologists, and certain professional specialties such as commercial artists. Add to this the other major occupations for which the community colleges prepare people such as retail salesclerks, secretaries, clerical workers, and nursing aides, and a continuation of high demand for job entry skills can be expected. Furthermore, the community colleges engage in much job upgrading for people who

are already working in particular job fields. In sum, enrollments will surpass six million before the end of the century.

Curriculum

The community college curriculum was designed in the institutions' early years. Courses similar to those found in the lower division of senior institutions were to be provided for students who would transfer and go on to the baccalaureate. Occupational studies were made available for students seeking employment in a wide range of occupations for which some postsecondary education was necessary. Adult education, offered through noncredit programs, has been a feature of the curriculum, along with some form of general education for students who were marking time until they decided what to do next.

Emphasis on one or another major curriculum area has shifted from time to time depending on student aspirations and on the availability of alternative educational resources. In some areas the community colleges are responsible for all of the publicly supported adult education while, in others, that function is provided by the K-12 system. Those colleges in close proximity to major university centers may do much lower division work while others, organized primarily as technical institutes, do practically none.

The most recent major curricular shift has been in the direction of remedial or compensatory studies. Nearly half the mathematics and English taught in community colleges is at the remedial level. In some areas remedial studies are funded at a level lower than collegiate courses but they may be sometimes

supplemented by vocational education monies. In all institutions, they have changed everything from text selection to public perception.

A major issue in remedial education has been whether to offer less than collegiate level composition and arithmetic studies through the academic departments or to set up a separate division through which all noncollegiate activities are presented. The academic departments are still in charge of basic studies in most colleges but where remedial education has become an excessively large endeavor, enrolling as many as a majority of the college-credit students, separate divisions have been organized to accommodate them. In many of those colleges, the learning resource centers, umbrella organizations for libraries, media support services, and tutorial activities, have been expanded and concepts of mastery learning have spread wherein students are tested at entry and successively throughout the program, advancing to the next unit only as they show progress. In some colleges where remedial studies are still the responsibility of the academic departments, supplemental instruction designed to teach students to read the textbooks and write the types of papers required in the college-credit courses has been introduced. This procedure allows students to enroll in the regular division but limits them to only one or two courses per term and requires them to participate in the remedial activities designed to support those courses. Thus even the ill-prepared students may begin their collegiate programs and avoid the stultifying process of being forced into classes much like

those that they could not abide in the lower schools.

Whether remedial studies are offered in separate divisions or whether supplemental instruction supports student enrollment in college level classes, the decline in student abilities has affected the level of discourse in community colleges (as in all schools). Richardson, Fisk, and Okun (1983) traced the devaluation of written language in their study of instruction in one community college and McGrath and Spear (1987) traced it in a broader context. Language has become fragmented, centering on unconnected bits of information; rather like the short bits both fostered by and reflected in televised news broadcasts and in many widely circulated newspapers and magazines.

Curriculum shifts have occurred also in specialized occupational preparation which ebbs and flows with extramural funding and local employment opportunities. Recent years have seen continued expansion in the health and engineering technologies and in office skills. However, many other areas remain prominent because of the lag in curriculum revision to fit changing market conditions and because enrollments in some programs, such as automotive repair and wood and metal working, are buoyed by hobbyists.

Providing customized job training is a promising area of development in occupational studies. Many community colleges have aggressively promoted specialized programs for private businesses or governmental agencies. These narrow focus, short term courses are usually designed and taught by college staff members in association with representatives of the agency whose employees will be enrolled and they are funded with special state

or federal economic development monies or by the business whose employees are being trained. The colleges often benefit by having portions of their overhead charged to such contracts and by integrating the customized job training with a college-based preservice program in a related field.

Possibilities

The community colleges face several possibilities in the years ahead. Some are likely because of apparent trends, while others would require many changes in state and local policies before they could be effected.

Assessing student learning is one possibility that is becoming a reality, although not necessarily in the form preferred by the educators. Assessing students at entry and placing them in programs where they have a good chance of succeeding had fallen out of favor in the 1970s but more recently it has once again become prominent. The reasons are that the administrators and legislators had begun viewing the failure rates as unconscionable and the faculty members had despaired of teaching classes comprised of students with reading abilities that ranged to the third to the thirteenth grade. Accordingly, state and locally mandated entry tests have become common and seem destined to expand through such programs as the California matriculation mandates and the New Jersey Basic Skills Testing Program.

Exit tests have also become prominent. Several states have rising-sophomore tests in which students are prohibited from progressing further in the state's publicly supported higher

education system unless they have demonstrated some level of minimal competency in basic studies areas. Florida led the way through its College Level Academic Skills Program and Texas recently introduced a program of its own but these types of state-mandated programs will not spread much further. They are viewed with disfavor by most practitioners who object on the grounds that the tests constrict individual college initiatives and cast undue aspersions on institutions where the student population has been ill-prepared in the lower schools. However, the same staff members who lament the imposition of externally devised tests of student achievement usually refuse to design their own. Rare is the college that has imposed an indigenously prepared set of assessment procedures on all or even a large number of its students. Arguments are that programs are diverse, student goals are not uniform, instructors vary in their approach, differences between courses must be protected. Typically the staff acts as though there are no instructional objectives that can be translated into a set of assessment activities and applied to the entire student body.

This inability to agree on objectives pervades all of higher education. (Its long history is based in an inappropriate translation of the concept of academic freedom.) But in the community colleges the antagonism to common learning outcomes has received further impetus from leaders who are convinced that their institutions are much more than the sum of the instruction that goes on within the classrooms. They may have taken seriously the contentions that their institutions should be coordinating all the community's educational services and acting

directly to uplift the region's economy. They may fear being judged on their contribution to student learning because of the untoward comparisons that will be made between their colleges and the senior institutions that have been blessed with students better prepared for collegiate studies at the outset. Furthermore, few within the colleges have sufficient knowledge of measurement concepts and those who do are rarely in influential positions so that they can impose these types of assessments. Still, the colleges continue to be judged by their contribution to student learning and those that do not prepare their students well for further collegiate work are viewed with ill-disguised contempt by the academics in other levels of higher education. This tension shows no sign of subsiding.

College leaders could take a broader view of assessment and begin initiatives to measure college effects on other standards. How many people used the community colleges as an avenue to higher status jobs in industries in which they were already employed? How many broke out of a cycle of family poverty? Which of the students who might not have gone beyond secondary school found a stepping stone to the baccalaureate? What has the institution done for the elderly who have attended programs for their own enlightenment? How many immigrants have been brought rapidly into the mainstream of American society through learning language and other forms of acculturation? These questions have rarely been addressed individually; no institution has put them together in the form of a consistent collegewide assessment program. This lacuna shows little sign of being filled because

the sanctions for not measuring college outcomes or the rewards for doing so are too modest. The colleges survive in a sphere of political influence and public perception that responds to images other than traditional educational research paradigms.

Patterns of funding have also led to distortion in understanding college contributions. For example, courses that carry college-level credit are funded as though all students were indeed planning on graduation and transfer. However, more than half the students in those courses have no such intention; they already have degrees or the job training program in which they are enrolled includes a set of general education requirements. The occupational courses are arrayed as though all students enrolled were planning on employment in the field for which they are being prepared. But many have no such intention; they are enrolled to obtain skills for their own purposes: automotive repair courses so that they can maintain their own cars, computer operating courses so that they can use their own personal computers. The organization of the curriculum is often out of step with the intentions of the students.

It might be useful to differentiate curriculum content from student intent. Curriculum could be characterized as the liberal arts (science, social science, humanities, and the fine and performing arts) and as skills (the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the recreational activities typically centered under physical education, and the many occupational skills taught in community colleges). Student intentions could be characterized as transfer, job entry, job upgrade, personal interest, and basic literacy attainment. This dual

reclassification would bring a more accurate perspective to the curriculum and to the intentions of the students who participate, thus leading to more accurate measurement of college effects. However, without a major shift in professional and public concern, such a separation of curriculum content from student intent is highly unlikely.

The rewarding of colleges differentially for certain outcomes is another far-reaching but equally distant possibility. At present, special funds are often awarded to institutions that build programs to prepare people for certain occupations. This pattern of earmarked reimbursement has led to well-integrated programs in the health sciences and in certain occupations deemed intensely useful for community concerns: waste water management, for example. However, despite all the rhetoric about the importance of transfer studies that would propel members of underrepresented groups toward the baccalaureate, no state agency has offered to reward the colleges in its jurisdiction for increasing the percentage of students who receive associate degrees or who transfer. Such an incentive could be effected merely by using a college's recent graduation and transfer rates as benchmarks and then adding a number of dollars to its budget for each additional student who receives an associate degree or transfers to a university after completing a specified number of credits. If this bounty system were effected, the attention of college leaders might be turned to the importance of transfer studies and the funds received could be used to bolster all sorts of transfer supporting activities. However, it is unlikely to

come to pass because most college staff members are antagonistic to any funding arrangement that depends on student achievement.

A Word on Research

The community colleges of America have not been favored with a large number of scholars studying their effects. Some research is conducted, but most of it is based on inappropriate paradigms, a phenomenon that plagues most research in the social sciences. An overarching problem is that social science research which follows the models set down by the natural and physical sciences is in fundamental error. Centered in the universities, this research is conducted by professors and students in professional schools of education, social welfare, and other human service areas. These schools came into the university on the coattails of the hard sciences and scientific models dominate their research functions. The effects of this distortion can be seen in other fields as well; the humanities, for example, where analytic philosophy has spiraled itself into a black hole of jargon and mathematical models that speaks not at all to lay people concerned with the meaning of life, and literature, where such arcane activities as textual deconstruction are thoroughly irrelevant to reading.

So it is in education where research takes two fundamental forms: status studies and studies purporting to change practice. The status studies are those which provide data on which policies or programs are based. The various estimates of student attainment, analyses of curriculum trends, and estimates of the colleges' contribution to the progress of their students or the economy of their region fall into this category. The studies

have no direct effect; they are done so that changes in college funding or staffing can be justified.

Comparative studies of student flow have their own peculiarities. Most are based on the assumption that all students had an equal chance to attend a community college or a university. They then seek to describe the differential effects of each type of institution. However, very few students had such opportunities and even if they did, the essential question of why one student chose the community college and the other the university typically remains unanswered. Studies deploring the low percentage of the community college matriculants who complete programs are similarly in error because they fail to account for all other positive effects of attending the institution. Nowhere else are the configurations of funding and program design more at variance with the purposes for which students attend.

The career programs similarly come in for their share of disapprobation from those who contend that relatively few students obtain jobs in the field for which they were trained. But the variance among programs and fields is quite large: the more closely controlled the entry to the program, the more likely the students will obtain employment. In some cases, as in most of the health fields, more than 90 percent of the students enter careers in the field. In others, as in real estate and sales programs, the job entry rate may be as low as 25 percent. Averaging them all together yields a distorted figure.

The career programs suffer also when contentions are made that they are antagonistic to student progress in the higher

education system. Many of them are carefully articulated with baccalaureate programs and far more students in career fields than in liberal arts areas transfer. The idea that career studies seduce students away from higher-status baccalaureate studies is an anachronism.

The studies purporting to measure the effect of varied practices and thus change instructional functions suffer from a different problem. Researchers who seek to control all variables typically arrange laboratory situations. But a report that male students with a low tolerance for anxiety who attempted to remember nonsense syllables in a dimly lit classroom taught by an authoritarian instructor is little more than amusing to practitioners who cannot even control the number of students they meet each day. And, outside the laboratory, we can prove conclusively only that in College A, on Day B, Instructor C, using Method D, taught Subject E to Students F through Z. Exceedingly few practitioners even read such reports, let alone modify their activities accordingly.

Studies that would change practice can only be done in association with practitioners in the practitioners' own environment. All potentially important variables need not be controlled; the intent should be to effect better practice, not to advance knowledge in the abstract. Many exhortations to practitioners begin with the phrase, "Let's not reinvent the wheel." But the wheel needs constantly to be reinvented and by the very people who are driving the vehicle.

The status of research on community colleges is that not nearly enough carefully monitored studies of the effects of

policy or practice are being done. Few university-based researchers have avoided being intimidated by the irrelevant paradigms that dominate their disciplines. Few state offices collect pertinent data routinely; those that do, Illinois, Maryland, and Washington, for example, stand out as beacons. Few college-based researchers have the critical mass of colleagues that they need to support their efforts. (The sixty Southern California community colleges support an average of less than one institutional researcher each, hardly enough to fill out the data-request forms.) Those that do, Miami-Dade (FL) and William Rainey Harper (IL), for example, continually produce sophisticated studies that form the basis for numerous institutional policy decisions.

And so the prospects and possibilities for community colleges remain dimly seen. The data are sparse, the categories indistinct. Few serious scholars have turned their attention to the institutions. The colleges sustain themselves as basic educational entities, shifting emphasis slowly in response to changing external conditions. Why, they act just like schools!

With all the caveats noted, it is still possible to make some informed guesses about college contributions. Transfer rates, a perennially favorite concern of those who would compare community colleges with the rest of higher education, can be estimated. Skirting the definitional problem, worth an essay of its own, we can extrapolate from the few reliable data sources that are available and conclude with the following:

The colleges award 350,000 associate degrees annually;

Over 75 percent of the degree recipients transfer, yielding a figure of 275,000.

Around 350,000 students transfer after taking a half year or more of course work at a community college without staying for the associate, for a total of 625,000.

Dividing that total by 5 million enrollees yields a transfer rate of 12.5 percent.

Dividing it by 1.75 million, the approximate number of students whose primary intention is transfer, yields a rate of 36 percent.

Around 20 percent of the students who recieve bachelor's degrees have taken some work in a community college.

Are the community colleges doing a good job in assisting people toward the baccalaureate? Pick a number.

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